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## A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century

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**Michael Rodgers,**

**"A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century"**

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**Abstract:** In his article "A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century" Michael Rodgers explores the relationship between Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and magical realism in order to theorize about genre formation in the twentieth century. Rodgers argues not only that specific twentieth-century narrative forms are bound intrinsically with literary realism and socio-political conditions, but also that these factors can produce formal commonalities.

## Michael RODGERS

### A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century

Although assigning generic labels to works of literature is an integral part of how readers determine meaning, the formation of genres remains a contentious issue. Genre theory, shaped largely by neo-classical accounts, has traditionally adopted a "species" approach advanced by such as in Ferdinand Brunetière's 1890 *Evolution des genres*. Modern-day genre theorists still maintain the importance of this "species" oriented methodology, the "biological relations between the members" (Fowler 42). Yet approaching genres solely as "normative rules with universal validity rather than as *ad hoc*, changing, and inherently fuzzy practices" (Frow 52) can smother angles of inquiry. Recent approaches in linguistics and pragmatics such as Norman Fairclough's 2003 *Analysing Discourse* or Christoph Unger's 2006 *Genre, Relevance and Global Coherence* ground genre in the context of communication, i.e., the power relationships between speakers or environmental impact (on genre formation see also Hoorn; Keunen). These approaches are alternatives to the evolutionary model and imply that genres can form and change in response to shared social and communicative needs. I argue that not only are specific twentieth-century narrative forms bound intrinsically with literary realism and socio-political conditions, but also that these conditions can produce formal commonalities. Although this may be intuitive, its demonstration -- namely the relationship between Vladimir Nabokov's 1938 *Invitation to a Beheading* and magical realism -- is important because of alternative ideas about genre formation it engenders. Rather than arguing that *Invitation to a Beheading* initiated magical realism, I examine the possibilities as to how formal commonalities can exist in distinct times and places.

Nabokov's understatement in imagining "readers who will jump up, ruffling their hair" (9) once having read *Invitation* is indicative of both the novella's bewildering content and his mischievous foresight. *Invitation* was first published serially throughout 1935-36 in the Russian emigration's major literary journal *Современные записки* (Contemporary Papers). It did not appear in its complete Russian form until 1938 and the English translation with an added foreword did not appear until 1959. Julian Connolly, in *Nabokov's Invitation to a Beheading*, reveals that the earliest reviewers were "understandably hesitant to make definitive evaluations" (5). One, for example, wrote that "the first and most sincere reaction after reading through *Invitation to a Beheading* is perplexity. What is this? Why was this book written? ... It's clear that Sirin [Nabokov's pen name] is seeking new paths" (Nabokov qtd. in Connolly 5). Sergej Davydov claims that political, metaphysical, and metaliterary interpretations have been the most prominent in the 75 years since *Invitation's* publication, yet its taxonomy remains problematic owing to "the various mirrors that can be turned to face the novel" (Davydov qtd. in Alexandrov 189). Despite Nabokov's admission that he "could never understand why every book of mine invariably sends reviewers scurrying in search of more or less celebrated names for the purpose of passionate comparison" (*Invitation* 7-8), analysis of similarities between *Invitation* and other texts should not, of course, be neglected because of a desire to control readers. By focusing on formal and conceptual parallels, the article illustrates that distinct narrative forms can utilize similar characteristics which, although uninformed by one another, suggest they are bound together in some way.

Although "magical realism" derives from Franz Roh's term to describe German post-expressionist art in 1925 (see Bowers 9), it was not applied as a literary label until the late 1940s and early 1950s by critics, scholars, and writers such as Arturo Uslar-Pietri, Alejo Carpentier, and Angel Flores (on magical realism in Russian literature see, e.g., Berlina). Wendy B. Faris, in "Scheherazade's Children," distills the somewhat nebulous genre into a range of particular tropes. Rather than engaging with the entirety of these (Faris puts forth five primary and nine postmodern magical realist traits), the article engages with those arguably most symptomatic of the tradition that the "text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic," that the "narrative appears ... as fresh, childlike," that there is a "strong presence of the phenomenal world," and that "reader may hesitate ... between two contradictory understandings of events" (Faris 167-85). Although *Invitation* can be seen to display each of these tropes, I stress the identification of unusual co-occurrences of formal features rather than reducing *Invitation* to a single reading.

The first, and arguably most integral, characteristic Faris provides is that magical realist texts should contain an irreducible element of magic. The genre, in this respect, differs from surrealist or fantastic literature in relying on readers "to follow the example of the narrator in accepting both realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level" (Bowers 3). Like Remedios the Beauty in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* who really does ascend to heaven, the prison director in *Invitation*, Rodrig, really does dissolve: "Moving his legs evenly in his columnar trousers, he strode from the wall to the table, almost to the cot-but, in spite of his majestic solidity, he calmly vanished, dissolving into the air. A minute later, however, the door opened once again, this time with the familiar grating sound, and, dressed as always in a frock coat, his chest out, in came the same person" (14). Here, the subversive power of magic occurring is in direct contrast to the logic readers traditionally use to interpret both word and world in realist fiction, a "system of conventions producing a lifelike illusion of some 'real' world outside the text" (Baldick 213). Instead, readers relinquish the supposedly immutable laws of literary realism by being asked to accept an acutely improbable scenario within its conventions. Such magic continues throughout *Invitation* such as when Cincinnatus describes the first time he levitates: "I stepped straight from the window sill on to the elastic air and--feeling nothing more than a half-sensation of bare-footedness (even though I had shoes on) -- slowly and quite naturally strode forward, still absently sucking and examining the finger in which I had caught a splinter that morning ... Suddenly ... I saw myself, a pink-smocked boy, standing transfixed in

mid-air; turning around, I saw, but three aerial paces from me, the window I had just left, and, his hairy arm extended in malevolent amazement, the -- Here, unfortunately, the light in the cell went out -- Rodion always turned it off exactly at ten" (82-83). While the staccato, convoluted description, and the inclusion of a "trivial" detail adheres to realist narrative technique, they serve to downplay the extraordinary happenings. Indeed, the use of aposiopesis, the breaking off in the middle of a sentence to extinguish the light, the narrative passage foregrounds a conflation between the realist tradition and the tropes of a genre that had not yet been conceived.

*Invitation's* engagement with magic explicitly relates to another of the tropes that Faris identifies: that magical realist texts are "fresh, childlike, even primitive ... Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way" (177). In other words, they choose to refute the hyperbole that typically accompanies such scenarios. This can be seen, in *Invitation*, when Cincinnatus's cell is described: "Here the walls of the cell started to bulge and dimple, like reflections in disturbed water; the director began to ripple, the cot became a boat. Cincinnatus grabbed the side in order to keep his balance, but the oarlock came off in his hand, and, neck-deep, among a thousand speckled flowers, he began to swim, got tangled, began sinking. Sleeves rolled up, they started poking at him with punting poles and grappling hooks, in order to snare him and pull him to the shore. They fished him out" (48-49). It is as if the wondrous happenings that occur in this passage are so commonplace that the narrator is under no obligation to explain the baffling scenario. Instead, the narration extends, reifies even, the metaphor of reflection with each successive sentence, asking for readers' acceptance through short, simple clauses such as "sleeves rolled up" and "they fished him out."

The inclusion of oarlocks, punting poles, and grappling hooks in the previous excerpt relates to Faris's claim that magical realist texts contain a "strong presence of the phenomenal world" (167). This presence is invoked by devoting descriptive detail to the everyday allowing thoroughly unambiguous matter to offset highly dubious happenings. We can see this operating, for example, in Italo Calvino's magical realist novel *Invisible Cities*: "If you choose to believe me, good. Now I will tell how Octavia, the spider-web city, is made. There is a precipice between two steep mountains: the city is over the void, bound to the two crests with ropes and chains and catwalks ... This is the foundation of the city: a net which serves as passage and as support. All the rest, instead of rising up, is hung below: rope ladders, hammocks, houses made like sacks, clothes hangers, terraces like gondolas, skins of water, gas jets, spits, baskets on strings, dumb-waiters, showers, trapezes and rings for children's games, cable cars, chandeliers, pots with trailing plants" (75). In this excerpt we find an assemblage of a menagerie of disparate objects, a spider-web city amongst inconspicuous bits and pieces. As a result, the detail devoted to the *bric-à-brac* acts to authenticate the single impossible detail. This preoccupation with physicality is also evident in *Invitation* as well, yet it produces a slightly different effect: "Seated on a chair, sideways to the table, as still as if he were made of candy, was a beardless little fat man, about thirty years old, dressed in old-fashioned but clean and freshly ironed prison pyjamas; he was all in stripes--in striped socks, and brand-new morocco slippers--and revealed a virgin sole as he sat with one stubby leg crossed over the other and clasped his shin with his plump hands; a limpid aquamarine sparkled on his auricular finger, his honey-blond hair was parted in the middle of his remarkably round head, his long eyelashes cast shadows on his cherubic cheek, and the whiteness of his wonderful, even teeth gleamed between his crimson lips" (50-51). This passage could be described as an exaggeration of the realist method of representing things as they really are. Yet Viktor Shklovsky's idea of defamiliarization is also at work--the abundant details are given such prominence that, like in the magical realist tradition, they "disrupt ... our habitual perception of the world, enabling us to 'see' things afresh" (Baldick 62). Rather than simply reading realist description of a well-dressed, plump man, the passage makes the grotesquely tactile M'sieur Pierre a foil to the protagonist's etherealness and positions consequently physicality as one of the novella's interpretative keys.

Connolly claims that "Nabokov could have been a master illusionist of literary realism. But his choice was always to spoil the illusion of lifelike narrative so that the reader would become conscious of the true chasm between lived experience and imaginative activity" (87). This chasm aligns with Faris's trope that in magical realist texts "the reader may hesitate ... between two contradictory understandings of events--and hence experiences some unsettling doubts" (171). Such hesitation is exemplified in *Invitation's* sham execution. As we approach the end of both the text and Cincinnatus, the carnivalesque world he inhabits begins to hemorrhage. Having been asked to count to ten by M'sieur Pierre,

One Cincinnatus was counting, but the other Cincinnatus had already stopped heeding the sound of the unnecessary count which was fading way in the distance; and, with a clarity he had never experienced before -- at first almost painful, so suddenly did it come, but then suffusing him with joy, he reflected: why am I here? Why am I lying like this? And, having asked himself these simple questions, he answered them by getting up and looking around. All around there was a strange confusion. Through the headsman's still swinging hips the railing showed. On the steps the pale librarian sat doubled up, vomiting. The spectators were quite transparent, and quite useless, and, they all kept surging and moving away -- only the back rows, being painted rows, remained in place. (191)

Although his decapitation is suggested by the librarian who "sat doubled up, vomiting," Cincinnatus' non-death is implied by his "getting up and looking around." That Cincinnatus "made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" not only confounds the reader's decision as to whether he has died or not but also if he makes his way to spiritual beings or just other opaque-like people (190-91). Further, the contradictory understanding of *Invitation's* execution scene has a parallel in the text that introduced *lo real maravilloso* to the Americas: Alejo Carpentier in his 1949 *The Kingdom of this World*. The novella details the events surrounding the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), the only successful slave revolution in the history of the Americas where Haitians gained

independence from their French colonizers. Early on in the tale, the Black slave Macandal is sentenced to execution for seditious activity. Yet, "what is remarkable is that the [execution] is visualized as a split event. The slaves witness his escape ... But the French colonizers and their agents, the Haitian soldiers, see nothing and instead witness his execution" (Hart and Ouyang 2). The passage reads as follows:

The bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the black waves of the sea of slaves. A single cry filled the square: "Macandal saved!" Pandemonium followed. The guards fell with rifle butts on the howling blacks, who now seemed to overflow the streets, climbing towards the windows. And the noise and screaming and uproar were such that very few saw that Macandal, held by ten soldiers, had been thrust head first into the fire, and that a flame fed by his burning hair had drowned his last cry. When the slaves were restored to order, the fire was burning normally like any fire of good wood, and the breeze blowing from the sea was lifting the smoke toward the window where more than one lady who had fainted had recovered consciousness. There was no longer anything more to see. That afternoon the slaves returned to their plantations laughing all the way. Macandal had kept his word, remaining in the Kingdom of This World. (Carpentier 35-37)

Such a parallel is curious, especially given that no evidence exists to suggest that Carpentier had read *Invitation*. In one respect, the executions of Cincinnatus and Macandal can be said to offer "contradictory meanings ... [that] coexist and operate equally within the text -- a semantic duplicity largely foreign to literary realism" (Hart and Ouyang 30) and both ostensibly read as execution scenes where magical occurrences undermine brutal regimes. Yet distinctions can be drawn. First, as Faris claims "in many cases, in magical realist fictions, we witness an idiosyncratic recreation of historical events, but events grounded firmly in historical realities -- often alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts" (170). In this respect, Carpentier's magic is only reserved for those possessing an innate connection to the magic of the Americas: it is not accessible for those who have traded their American authenticity for European power. Where, as Connolly claims, Nabokov is "obviously letting us have [the execution scene] both ways" (85), the execution is explicitly split in Carpentier's novella: the slaves witness (and accept) Macandal's escape, whereas the Haitian troops (acting as agents of their colonialist French masters) carry out the execution. Carpentier foreshadows this reading in his prologue to the novella: "The marvelous becomes unequivocally marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (a miracle), a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed or singularly favorable illumination of the previously unmarked riches of reality, an amplification of the measures and categories of reality, perceived with peculiar intensity due to the exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of 'limit state.' First of all, the sense of the marvelous presupposes a faith" (iv). Kingdom, grounded in historical accuracy, cements the marvelous in the real in analogous fashion to what 'gothic counterfeit' or indeed 'metaphysical conceit' achieve in different genres. Carpentier's term *lo real maravilloso*, then, should be regarded as an early incarnation of magical realism that privileges both place and faith and reserves schisms in reality for a select group. The political context of Nabokov's novella, often through a breakdown of logic, privileges the right for creative practice to exist in the face of persecution regardless of time or domain (on time in Nabokov's work, see, e.g., Lyaskovets).

Redolent of the privileged perspective that Carpentier gives the indigenous Other in his writing, James D. Hardy and Leonard Stanton, writing on the relationship between magical realism and the work of Nikolai Gogol, claim that "in 'the northern capital of our spacious empire' the things that required explanation were the ordinary and everyday, while the wondrous, the supernatural, the incomprehensible could be expected to occur as a matter of course...Reversal of the magical into the ordinary was the realism of St Petersburg alone" (134). In their magical realist reading of Gogol's tales, Hardy and Stanton claim that in "The Nose" "magical realism takes the form of an abrupt abrogation of natural law, for no discernible reason and to no clear purpose. The disruption of the natural order happens, and then the natural order is restored as if nothing had happened" (128). Interestingly, *Invitation* harbors multiple examples of such abrogation. Early on in the novel for example, "Cincinnatus moved the table and began dragging it backwards as it shrieked with rage: how unwillingly, with what shudderings it moved across the stone floor!" (25). Two pages later however, we are told that Cincinnatus "tried -- for the hundredth time -- to move the table, but, alas, the legs had been bolted down for ages" (27). Nabokov's violations of life's continuity (furthered through the frequent metamorphosing of Rodion into Rodrig and vice versa) echo the absurdist, a-logical prose of Gogol. Hardy and Stanton allow a triangulation of the work of Gogol and Nabokov through magical realism despite, first, the marked disparity in place and time and second, the difficulty in reconciling the social relevance of *lo real maravilloso* with the social irrelevance of surrealism. Thus, although Nabokov's novella can be viewed as an example of magical realism *avant la lettre*, the numerous textual parallels described in this first section suggest linkage on broader philosophical terms. This is confirmed by Christine Baron and Manfred Engel who claim in their introduction to *Realism/Anti-Realism in 20th-Century Literature* that literature and art have been dominated by what has been called a "crisis of representation" (9), but might as well have been called a lack of interest in mere empirical and social reality and a discontent with habitualized perception and the world-view of convention, reason, and pragmatism. This anti-realistic attitude which rebelled against the *Weltanschauung* and the artistic and literary devices of 19th-century Realism and Naturalism originated in the epistemological scepticism at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Having fled Russia in 1919 in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Nabokov family headed to England before settling in Berlin. In 1937, with rising anti-Semitism in Germany, Nabokov and his Jewish wife Vera Slonim and son Dmitri moved to Paris. Nabokov reveals these tumultuous political environments in the foreword to the English translation of *Invitation* that he: "composed the Russian original exactly a quarter of a century ago in Berlin, some fifteen years after escaping from the Bol-



shevist régime, and just before the Nazi régime reached its full volume of welcome. The question whether or not my seeing both in terms of one dull beastly farce had any effect on this book should concern the good reader as little as it does me" (7). Confirming the notion that readers should always be careful of taking authors' words at face value, the text's conformist world, ostentatious trials, and depiction of the castigated outsider suggests that socio-political contexts impacted the genesis of Nabokov's book. Indeed, in *Strong Opinions* Nabokov calls both *Invitation* and *Bend Sinister* "absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism" (156). Interestingly, this goes against Michael Tratner's perspective that "the Modernist era marked a retreat from Victorian concern with social issues into introspection, solipsism, or aesthetic detachment" (3). In "Realism in the Balance" for example, György Lukács laments the demise of the realist movement and modernism's frequent inability, as a "one-dimensional" art form to confront the mainstream of society (1033). However, *Invitation*, published in the same year as Lukács's study, can be seen to conflate realist and modernist practice in problematizing verisimilitude through experimentation while engaging, albeit allusively, with socio-political concerns. This also goes against the numerous comments Nabokov made repudiating interest in politics. In *Lectures on Literature* for example, Nabokov claims that "the study of the sociological or political impact of literature has to be devised mainly for those who are by temperament or education immune to the aesthetic vibrancy of authentic literature, for those who do not experience the telltale tingle between the shoulder blades" (64).

That *Invitation's* conception occurred at a time of literary experimentation and political oppression mirrors the formation of magical realism in twentieth-century Latin America. With the threat of government intervention, writers commented frequently on political situations through allegorical or *roman à clef* texts which enabled them to question existing power structures with reduced likelihood of retribution. The period of prolonged civil war in Colombia, for example, known as *la violencia* (1948-58), saw a rebellion against a system of social and economic stratification. Michael Wood claims that "The violence came from guerrillas, gangsters, self-defence groups, the police, the army; and some 200,000 people (the low estimate) died in it. When it was said to be over, or more or less under control, in 1962, there were still 200 civilian deaths a month. The Violence provoked a flood of fiction, and García Márquez himself addresses it in *No One Writes to the Colonel* and *In Evil Hour*. It makes sense to say that the Violence appears in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as the massacre of striking workers, which is violent enough and could stand as a compression and anticipation of the later phenomenon, an allusion and a synecdoche" (9-10). The following passage from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* not only depicts the political commentary that Wood describes, but is also noticeable for perpetuating the manner in which death is conveyed in both *Invitation* and *Kingdom*: "After his shout something happened that did not bring on fright but a kind of hallucination. The captain gave the order to fire and fourteen machine guns answered at once. But it all seemed like a farce. It was as if the machine guns had been loaded with caps, because their panting rattle could be heard and their incandescent spitting could be seen, but not the slightest reaction was perceived, not a cry, not even a sigh among the compact crowd that seemed petrified by an instantaneous invulnerability. Suddenly, on one side of the station, a cry of death tore open the enchantment: 'Aaaagh, Mother'" (311). Although García Márquez's depiction may simply be coercing readers to accept temporal rupturing rather than a split event, the scene's relationship to the executions in *Invitation* and *Kingdom* is marked. Such engagement with real-life political threat and disjuncture in the face of finality suggest an alliance between *Invitation* and magical realism by proposing that oppressive systems can be weakened through intelligent subversion. Zamora and Faris, for example, claim that: "In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation" (3). This cohabitation of the real and the marvelous suggests a re-envisioning of the world that asks readers to refashion established patterns of political and literary thought. In doing so, readers are effectively able to infer why writers might be including magical happenings and therefore can decode the text: "In contrast to the magical images constructed by Surrealism out of ordinary objects, which aim to appear virtually unmotivated and thus programmatically resist interpretation, magical realist images, while projecting a similar initial aura of surprising craziness, tend to reveal their motivations—psychological, social, emotional, political—after some scrutiny" (Faris 171). I should like to note that the texts under analysis here are not straightforward political allegories. Instead, it is the coupling of socio-political context with realist subversion that is integral. That is, they adopt realist prose fiction operators (fidelity to ordinary subject matter, linear progression, verisimilitude) to toy with their accepted implications. In the twentieth century, reacting against the world of the novel and a heightened threat of warfare, anti-realist narrative forms can be seen to subvert the political context of a literary tradition in a way that liberates the textual experience.

Faris's and Zamora's idea of magical realism being "antibureaucratic, against the established social order" (3), in this respect, aligns with Bowers' claim that the "narrative mode ... [is] chosen for the purposes of literary experimentation" (65). Indeed, Faris claims that texts such as Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* "respond to a desire for narrative freedom from realism, and from a univocal narrative stance; they implicitly correspond textually in a new way to a critique of totalitarian discourses of all kinds" (180). It is perhaps unsurprising that *Invitation* fails to fit the realist mould in being "a literary convention toward which Nabokov has shown both lofty disdain and impish mockery" (Connolly 47). Yet Nabokov engages with the realist agenda through his continual dismissal of it in the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov claims that "'reality' [is] (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes)" (312). Indeed, in undermining the conventional values and inferences that readers draw traditionally from such texts, *Invitation* punctures the politics of realist fiction. In this respect, the novella actively engages with what Hans Robert Jauss labels the horizon of expectations, a term used to "designate the set of cultural norms, assumptions, and criteria shaping the

way in which readers understand and judge a literary work at a given time ... Such 'horizons' are subject to historical change, so that a later generation of readers may see a very different range of meanings in the same work, and revalue it accordingly" (Baldick 116). In extrapolating from shared conceptual and thematic relationships between text and genre, my case study demonstrates the benefits of comingling socio-political history and literary tradition in order to facilitate revaluation.

In *Kinds of Literature*, Alastair Fowler outlines two ways in which genres can form: monogenesis and assembly of the repertoire. For the purpose of my discussion, I engage with the assembly of the repertoire initially. Fowler claims that "in literature there is no creation *ex nihilo* ... Either the new kind is a transformation of an existing one, or else it is assembled. Assembly, too, uses existing generic materials" (156). A piece of literature, he goes on to say, is inevitably influenced by the genres that have preceded it and so cannot be written in a vacuum: "Todorov's dictum that 'a new genre is always a transformation of one or several old genres' is clearly right in its broad lines" (158). Yet Fowler claims that "The phase of assembly may of course be largely unconscious. The author perhaps thinks only of writing in a fresh way. It will be his successors who first see the potential for genre and recognize, retrospectively, that assembly of a new form has taken place ... Whether or not it is meant to be innovative, the assembled form is apprehended as a new genre only from a subsequent perspective. This retrospective critical insight regroups individual works, and sees them now as belonging to the new genre, now anticipating it, now differing in kind" (159). Given that *Invitation* is often classified as a member of "the literary genre known as *dystopia*, a type of anti-utopia ... and linked with such works as Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We* and George Orwell's *1984*" (Connolly 6), one possible account of *Invitation*, then, is to entertain the idea that the novella "assembles" existing modes of narrative. Yet, although dystopian literature is often characterized by sinister content, unusual settings and unlikely scenarios found in texts such as H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* or, indeed, *Invitation*, the latter seems to go significantly beyond an evolving literary tradition. Although, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" T.S. Eliot claims that "we pretend to find what is individual" when we praise a work and that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (13, 22), the matter-of-fact incorporation of magical occurrences, a notably strong engagement with the phenomenal world, and the contradictory presentation of events in *Invitation* undermines the idea that the novella has simply evolved from the dystopian genre; something akin to Harold Bloom's idea of swerving from a predecessor (14). Contrasting with assembly of the repertoire, however, is monogenesis: "the origins of genres are located in the achievements of individual writers. Each kind has a single inventor, in this theory, or at most two or three: epic goes back to Homer, tragedy to Aeschylus, the verisimilar novel to Fielding and Richardson, the historical novel to Scott, the open-form long poem to Pound and Williams" (Bloom 14). Fowler accepts that "The contributions of successors, in fact, are quite as decisive as that of the 'originator.' That is obvious from the fact that if the originator has no successors, his achievement can only be an isolated one, without any significance for genre" (153). Fowler's example of Joyce's anti-novel, now deemed a pre-emptory exemplar of postmodernist fiction, is particularly apt in relation to my study: "Literature may take occasional leaps of generic originality... A *Finnegans Wake* may depart radically from existing forms; but then it is likely to remain unassimilated, until more dilute imitations provide the missing generic context *ex post facto*" (168).

It is important to keep in mind that *Invitation* has not been integrated comfortably into an existing category of genre or been brought into alignment with magical realism. Yet, this *ex post facto* process of providing generic context is important as it privileges readers with hindsight with the ability to assign generic labels. Such retrospection, with the appropriate evidence, allows *Invitation* to be read as a magical realist text. As Jauss claims, genres "cannot be deduced or defined, but only historically determined, delimited, and described" (80). In doing so, it strengthens the alternative idea that genre, in the twentieth century at least, is sculpted by writers' intentions; their coupled responses to the strictures imposed by literary realism and socio-political problems (for Joyce, the limits of renderable fiction; for Nabokov, the threat of political oppression over aesthetic freedom). With this in mind, the case study of *Invitation* and magical realism's relationship suggests that twentieth-century anti-realist narratives appear to be have been independently conceived through writers' responses to a dominant literary discourse and the socio-political present rather than simply evolving through an anti-realist stream of literary tradition embodied by traditions such as medieval romance or gothic fiction.

A brief cross-examination of three anti-realist narrative forms spanning the twentieth century bolsters this idea. The opening of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* "When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach in his bed" (87) couples realist narration with an anti-realist event. The declarative opening of *The Metamorphosis* diverges from prototypical realist fiction in that it should act as the novel's climax. As such, the sentence is indicative of a narrative masquerading as realist fiction only to confound our preconceived notions about how realist texts operate and the politics they adopt. The text's articulation of a *reductio ad absurdum* narrative in a logical, realist manner can also be seen as a way of portraying people "dehumanized in the capitalist system" (Bowers 29). Initially started in 1928 and published in 1967, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* has considerable political parallels with *Invitation* in engaging with "the housing crisis, the state-controlled economy, [and] the early years of terror under Stalin" (Weeks 5). And, like the texts I examine, *Master* includes numerous passages of logical, realist narration to describe anti-realist events: "At a huge writing desk with a massive inkstand an empty suit sat and with a dry pen, not dipped in ink, traced on a piece of paper. The suit was wearing a necktie, a fountain pen stuck from its pocket, but above the collar there was neither neck nor head, just as there were no hands sticking out of the sleeves. The suit was immersed in work and completely ignored the turmoil that reigned around it" (185). The novel's pre-empting of magical realist traits (an "irreducible element" of magic, matter-of-fact narration, and a strong presence of the phenomenal world) act to harpoon Soviet oppression and critique the idea that change is unfeasible.



Earmarking David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* alongside other late 1990s texts such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, James Woods, claims that a "genre is hardening ... familial resemblances are asserting themselves and a parent can be named: Dickens ... This is not magical realism. It is hysterical realism ... The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked" (<<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-all-too-inhuman>>). Woods's review is curious in at least two ways. First, his allusion to Nietzsche draws a literary analogy to the latter's idea that the "real world" or "noumenon" is not only inaccessible to man but also of no significance. Second, Woods's idea of realism being overworked or exhausted misses the anti-realist nature of the texts in question and his raising of familial linkage redolent of the biological model of genre formation both downplays the extent to which realism has perpetuated unwanted coercion or norm enforcement and neglects the new forms of realism that such departure allows for (such as stream-of-consciousness fiction). Instead, *Infinite Jest*, a gargantuan novel set in a not-too-distant future version of North America, has at its core an anti-realist event, an esoteric film that subjects viewers to immediate boredom with other stimuli and eventually death. As such, its flouting of realist conventions, its overwrought representation of our modern hyperconnected, corporate societies to examine specific social phenomena, suggests common linkage between anti-realist narrative forms in the twentieth century. Our hesitation to chart such resemblances and ponder their implications seems to derive from our inherited biological model of genre.

Fowler posits in his conclusion to *Kinds of Literature* that extraliterary events are one way in which genres change: "pastoral was obviously affected by urban development; the factory novel has some connection with the Industrial Revolution" (277). Although many genres, historically, may be explicable through species or monogenesis accounts, twentieth-century genre formation appears indebted to a confluence of aesthetic form and socio-historical conditions. Its demonstration is important however because of the alternative ideas it engenders: that particular narrative forms appear able to evolve internally rather than through simple evolution of literary tradition; that they relate to material conditions; and that specific socio-political contexts can relate to a particular set of formal features. In *Genre: The New Critical Idiom* Frow describes Fowler's approach as a "Wittgensteinian logic of 'family resemblance'" in order to address the "fuzziness and open-endedness of the relation between texts and genres" (88-89). Frow raises an important caveat based on Fowler's approach however: where the line of dissimilarity is drawn. Claiming that Fowler's approach privileges exhibited resemblances at the expense of function, Frow puts forth an alternative view based on the idea that we can "classify easily at the level of prototypes, and with more difficulty ... as we diverge from them. The judgement we make ('is it like this, or is it more like that?') is as much pragmatic as it is conceptual, a matter of how we wish to contextualise these texts and the uses we wish to make of them" (89-90).

In conclusion, by comparing *Invitation* and magical realism's socio-political circumstances and formal features, then, I not only problematize existing thinking about modern genre formation, but also demonstrate that retrospection can draw political and literary liberty back into dialogue.

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